Generalised seizures

Primary generalised seizures involve the whole brain and therefore involve the whole body. There are many types of generalised seizures, some convulsive and others non-convulsive.

Absence seizures

(previously called ‘petit mal seizures’)

This is a typically a brief seizure usually occurring in the young and involves the whole brain. With this type of seizure, the person’s awareness and responsiveness are impaired. They simply stare and their eyes might roll back or their eyelids flutter. It can be difficult to tell the difference between absence seizures and daydreaming. However, absence seizures start suddenly, cannot be interrupted, last a few seconds, and then stop suddenly. The person then resumes what they were doing. Although these seizures usually last less than ten seconds, they can occur many times daily, and thus can be very disruptive to learning.

Myoclonic seizures

Myoclonic seizures are brief, shock-like jerks of a muscle or a group of muscles, usually lasting no more than a second or two, which at times can result in a fall. There can be just one, but sometimes many will occur within a short time. (Clusters)

Atonic seizures

Atonic seizures cause a sudden loss or decrease of normal muscle tone and the person often falls to the ground. Often called ‘drop seizures’, these very brief seizures can cause head or facial injury. Wearing protective headwear may minimise injury.

Tonic seizures

Tonic seizures greatly increase normal muscle tone and the body, arms, or legs suddenly become stiff. These seizures most often occur in clusters during sleep, although they can occur when the person is awake. If the person is standing, they will fall quite heavily, often injuring their head, face or neck. Protective headwear may minimise injury. Seizures usually last less than 20 seconds.

Tonic-clonic seizures

(previously called ‘grand mal seizures’)

During a tonic-clonic seizure, a person’s body stiffens, air is forced past the vocal cords often causing a cry or groan, and they fall to the ground if standing (the tonic phase). Their limbs then begin to jerk in strong, symmetrical, rhythmic movements (the clonic phase).
The person may experience excess saliva from the mouth, go blue or red in the face, or lose control of their bladder and/or bowel as the body relaxes.

As consciousness returns, the person may be confused, drowsy, agitated or depressed. They may have a headache and want to sleep. This drowsiness can last for a number of hours. Although this type of seizure can be frightening to watch, the seizure it is unlikely to seriously harm the person experiencing it. They may, however, vomit or bite their tongue and can sometimes injure themselves if they hit nearby objects as they fall or jerk.

Tonic-clonic seizures generally last one to three minutes. If the active movements of the seizure last more than five minutes, it is advisable to call an ambulance. Prolonged seizures, or a series of seizures with or without a break in between, indicate a dangerous condition called convulsive status epilepticus and demands emergency treatment, mostly in the form of rescue medication administered in the community.

Information provided from Epilepsy Australia’s brochure ‘Diagnosing Epilepsy, answering your questions’. To be reviewed October 2020

Although every effort has been made to ensure accurate and up to date information is provided, Epilepsy Queensland and its advisors cannot accept any liability in relation to the information provided. It is strongly recommended that you discuss any information with your doctor.